THE SOCIAL IDEALISM OF WILLIAM MORRIS AND OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

A STUDY IN FOUR UTOPIAN NOVELS

BY

WILLIAM FERDINAND EKSTROM

A.B., University of Illinois, 1935
A.M., University of Illinois, 1936

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
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A STUDY IN FOUR UTOPIAN NOVELS

I. Morris and Howells as Social Critics

"Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time," sang William Morris. "Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?" Perhaps no answer could ever be more clearly implicit in the poetic language of a soul-searching question. For if a spirit frustrated in seeking its fulfillment in an unsympathetic culture can be said to inhabit the earth out of its due time, Morris was without doubt an anachronism in industrial civilization. But no man so little of his world was at the same time more undeniably in that world, earnestly seeking to remold it to his heart's desire. The dreams of such a man could not long be idle fancies in an ivory tower; they soon became visions of a future commonwealth where man at last would feel impelled to set the crooked straight.

Nevertheless, Morris was an artist and a craftsman who might be permitted those eccentricities which are thought to be the price of artistic temperament. But when an American editor and critic like William Dean Howells voiced a similar indictment of industrial society, he was simply not credited with the obvious intent of his message. For the authority which Howells wielded in American letters and the apparently unruffled calm of his editorial study had given him an eminently sound and safe place in the established traditions of American thought. The even tenor of his life, the seeming prudery which compromised his realism, and the solid, respectable quality of his carefully polished prose fiction made him appear a true child of Brahmin conservatism. Moreover, the manner in which the realists outdistanced him and the way in which social criticism shifted

from revolution to reform in the early part of the present century rendered him ineffective, for he had not gone far enough in his penetration into the psychological springs of human behavior to seem a daring realist, and he had gone too far in the revolutionary implications of his utopian thought to be in step with the slower but more effective pace of trust-busting progressivism.

Except in the early reviews of *A Traveler from Altruria* and *Through the Eye of the Needle,* the social message of Howells was long ignored, and when it finally did receive the attention of critics, it was thought to be a passing enthusiasm for the social idealism of Tolstoy or a second-rate imitation of the currently popular Bellamy. Closer investigation revealed that Gronlund, the prophet of Marx in America, had been instrumental in converting Howells to an actual adherence to socialism, a discovery which led to a further review of his social criticism. This reexamination laid bare his radical attack on industrialism, an attack which could not be paralleled in Bellamy or Gronlund or the other American critics, for their quarrel was with capitalist exploitation, not with industrial methods of production. At this point, the suggestion of the early reviewers of Howells' utopian thought that Howells drew much of his inspiration from the social criticism of William Morris came in for renewed interest and offered an opportunity to explain what had hitherto been obscure in Howells' message.

It is this curious parallel between the thought of Morris and of Howells *in their reactions against industrialism* that I propose to examine. The first task will be to trace the sources of utopian thought upon which Morris was able to draw, to analyze the intellectual milieu in which he wrote, and to discover how distinctive were his own contributions to the criticism of industrial society. The second will be to examine the temper of social thought in America, to perceive what Howells drew from it and what he found wanting, and to place his utopian criticism in juxtaposition

with that of Morris in order to determine how far the two indictments of industrial society and the two dreams of an ideal commonwealth are parallel. The third task will be to compare the techniques of Morris and Howells as utopists and to evaluate the contribution of each writer to utopian thought and to the criticism of industrial civilization.

II. The Intellectual Milieu of William Morris

In arriving at his utopian philosophy, Morris did not ignore the many significant things which had already been said about man and industrial society. He drew a deep inspiration from the utopian tradition, particularly from More and Fourier, but his ideas were more broadly the culmination of a century of criticism directed against modern civilization. His moral faith in the goodness of man was sanctioned by the idealistic tradition inspired by the Romantic movement. He did not accept the new Positivist religion with its high priesthood of scientists and industrialists, but he shared Spencer's ultimate hopes for the perfection of man in an ideal environment. His gospel of work found its precedent in the preachments of Carlyle and Ruskin, especially in the latter's doctrine of production for beauty and pleasure, but he rejected Carlyle's stern voice of duty demanding that work be performed as a grim necessity and Ruskin's insistence that work be an instrument for the preservation of every form of inequality. The principle of equalitarianism, however, was to be found elsewhere in the Victorian milieu. This principle, long fostered by the middle class in its rise to power, found sympathetic echoes in Dickens and Eliot and Mrs. Gaskell, in the Chartist movement and in the Marxian dialectic, in the social conscience of Mill and in the apostolic fervor of Matthew Arnold. And even though this doctrine of equality was rejected by the middle class once its implications began to arouse hopes in the breasts of the proletariat, it yet succeeded in providing an inspiration for the utopian idealism of Morris.

III. The Utopian Thought of William Morris

Morris took much of what the utopian tradition and the social thought of the nineteenth century had to offer, but he transformed it into a concept of life so distinctly his own that it has a vitality quite apart from the sources of its growth. His indictment of the injustices and the wastes of plutocratic society and his historical approach to criticism are certainly Marxist; his fulminations against the ugliness and the mechanistic character of the industrial order are in the spirit of Ruskin. Since he revolts against both capitalism and industrialism, his point of view is more radical than that of either of his masters, and yet it is at the same time simpler and more humane. His remedy for the ugliness and wretchedness of the industrial order is not an industrialism rendered more hideous by proletarian sponsorship in the manner of Marx, but the opportunity to experience the beauty and pleasure of artistic craftsmanship. His solution to the problem of waste and the exploitation of human values by capitalist plutocracy is not a revival of paternalism under the guidance of Ruskin's benevolent aristocracy, but a free and equal fellowship of all men in small and completely socialized local units. And this fellowship is based upon his remarkable faith in the good will of men freely engaged in work of their own choice and inspiration. Gone are bigness and centrality, the unwieldy and war-inspiring nation-state and the festering, overcrowded metropolis. Gone also are the vulgarity and crassness of commercialism, the philistinism and penury of inequality, and the perversion of science and education to the dark purposes of Mammon. Decentralized local administration and communal fellowship are compounded with the highest degree of personal freedom and individual artistic expression.

From Morris' point of view, if society were so organized that all men were equally free to do constructive work, if all were permitted the pleasures of artistic creation, if all could have the sense of adequacy, of achievement, of use-

fulness which is the reward of craftsmanship in a free society, then a spirit of fellowship would replace the harsh and bitter struggle for existence which holds the soul of man in its inexorable grip. Such was the message of *A Dream of John Ball* and of *News from Nowhere.*

IV. The Intellectual Milieu of William Dean Howells

There was much in this utopian dream to appeal to the sensitive and artistic mind of William Dean Howells, for it provided what was so sadly lacking in American thought. In America, utopian idealism had been either frustrated by experiment in hopelessly isolated communities or perverted by a dream of technological progress which sought out comfort and luxury rather than beauty and simplicity as its goal. Social criticism had, it is true, received the original impetus of a high idealism in Emerson and Thoreau and Whittier, but it had exhausted itself in the struggle against slavery and had no message for the wretched victims of industrialism. When the revolt came, it was led not by men who were the heirs of America's loftiest cultural traditions, but by men whose spirit was alien to the artistic temper of Howells. They were sincere men, eager to abate the misery of a suffering humanity, but the ugliness, the crassness, the vulgarity of the world about them they completely ignored. They accepted the American dogma that work was a grim necessity which American technological genius could reduce to a merely unfortunate interlude in a Roman holiday of unparalleled comfort and luxury.

As for equalitarian idealism, it is true that it was an American tradition of long and honorable lineage, but by the end of the nineteenth century, Jefferson's ringing phrases had a hollow sound for all except the most unobservant and hypocritical. Although the social critics of the day time and again challenged the reigning plutocracy, the equality that they sought was economic only. The democratization of the arts was a concept far beyond the scope of their imaginations.

V. The Utopian Thought of William Dean Howells

In such an intellectual milieu, the careful realist and sensitive artist in Howells could not arrive at a satisfying philosophy. The faith of Emerson and Thoreau in the goodness of man, the American worship of energy and achievement, and the frontier spirit of Jacksonian equality —these, it is true, had a real meaning, but they required something more. They needed to be compounded with a creative and artistic spirit, an artistic spirit made democratic and commonplace to fuse with the American temper. This spirit Howells could certainly not find in Marx or in Marxist critics in America. Nor could he find it in more than fragmentary form in Ruskin or Tolstoy. But he did find this fusion of the equalitarian spirit and the artistic temper —this indictment of industrialism on both moral and aesthetic grounds—in the social criticism of William Morris.

Now this connection with Morris has not completely escaped attention. The early reviewers of the Altrurian vision made note of it, and critics like Parrington, Smith, and Taylor, in their studies of Howells, have acknowledged it. The "Editor's Study," the most effective forum for the expression of Howells' mature judgments, reveals clearly that Howells had read Morris' social criticism attentively and that he was keenly aware of it during the period that his own social conscience was most seriously aroused. Moreover, the utopias themselves pay due tribute to Morris and indicate unmistakably that Howells was thoroughly familiar with *News from Nowhere.*

But the evidence for the influence of Morris on Howells lies not so much in the fact that Morris was carefully read and significantly mentioned as in the fact that Howells had a real need for something more than the American critics had to offer. By temperament and by experience he was inclined to rebel against ugliness, drudgery, and merely mechanical activity and to be profoundly moved by the dull human anguish suffered daily in the subtle manifestations

of social inequality. The remedy for these ills could not be found in the mechanical leveling and industrial efficiency of Bellamy and Gronlund, but it was ready at hand in the gospel of craftsmanship and human fellowship which was being preached by William Morris.

The message of Howells was a little strange to America's unaccustomed ears. The burden of this message was that the eager, industrious, and enterprising force in American character must be directed toward creative and artistic goals, so that honesty and quality and beauty may be the chief ends of American production rather than merely quantity and intricacy and novelty. And the equality which men had known in America at the polls and often enough in the schools and the churches and the courts had to be broadened to include the shops and the fields and the parlors and the drawing rooms if it was to be true equality, for it must provide for every man the freedom to work and to create, unhampered by artificial restrictions of any kind. Moreover, American individualism, with its gospel of laissez-faire, had to learn that the real fulfillment of the individual lies in working together, in the fellowship of communal enterprise, each striving to contribute to the wealth of society rather than to seize and hoard and monopolize what has been created by the sweat of another's brow.

VI. The Technique of Depicting Utopia

The impact of these utopian ideals on the reality of American life Howells recorded effectively in *A Traveler from Altruria,* but *Through the Eye of the Needle,* the inevitable sequel which carried the reader out to utopia, was a comparative failure. Howells lacked the long-range imagination to evoke a utopian vision just as he clearly possessed the keen observation and talent for short flights of the fancy which made possible the delightful satire of the earlier work. Fundamentally Howells, like Morris, criticizes society by providing an ideal alternative, but there ends the similarity

of their artistic accomplishments. Morris' *Dream of John Ball* is a profoundly moving vision which compels one to a sense of dedication to the great and holy cause of achieving utopia, and his *News from Nowhere* is an enticing account of its pleasurable rewards. As a guide to the pagan delights of that happy realm Morris is indeed without peer, but should another traveler from utopia ever find his way again to the world of Western civilization, he would be hard pressed to find a more faithful, a more competent, and a more delightful recorder of his experiences than William Dean Howells.

VII. The Significance of Morris and Howells as Utopists

The message of Morris to nineteenth-century England and the contemporary message of Howells to America was obviously not in the spirit of the prevailing industrialism and the governing plutocracy. The weaknesses of their utopias from the modern point of view are all too obvious. Both writers too much ignore the benefits of a high standard of living under industrialism, they suppose that all men are equally fit for the pleasure of artistic craftsmanship, and they are far too confident of the essential goodness of human nature, a premise by no means universally demonstrated by experience. Morris, particularly, invites criticism for minimizing intellectual and spiritual achievement, for assuming that neighborly fellowship is an adequate substitute for government, and for belittling industrial and parliamentary reform. Howells, with his hedging on the absolute goodness of man and the absolute pleasurableness of work, is not quite so open to challenge, but he has been charged on the other hand with timidity and half-hearted devotion to his ideal, and with an utter failure to comprehend the most elementary political realities.

When all this has been said, the fact nevertheless remains that imperfect though their utopian dreams may be, they

yet provide a very significant criticism of life. For even in this twentieth century it may be that the end of all production ought not to consist so largely of a wasteful and endless stream of intricate gadgets or an eternal wrangle over wages and hours and profits. It may be that all men need not be driven to labor solely by the compulsion of daily want and fear. It may be that men can work together in something like a spirit of fellowship and equality as society increasingly eliminates the opportunities for exploitation. And it may even be that the spirit of art and the love of beauty can become a part of everyday reality for an ever-increasing number of people. As long as these possibilities remain—as long as they can still challenge the imagination of men, the voice of William Morris has not been completely stilled, and that of William Dean Howells, long ignored as a meaningless echo of Tolstoy or Bellamy, may yet be heard in its own accents again.

VITA

William Ferdinand Ekstrom was born in Rockford, Illinois, June 14, 1912. He attended the local schools, graduating from Rockford High School in 1929. In 1931, he entered the University of Illinois, and continued his studies there until 1942. He received his B. A. in 1935 and his M. A. in 1936. During the academic year 1935-36, he held a teaching scholarship, and from 1936 on, he was a full-time assistant in the Department of English. In 1942, he received a scholarship from the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, and the following year he completed the course with the degree of Industrial Administrator. From April, 1943, to November, 1945, he served in the Armed Forces of the United States, returning to the University of Illinois in December, 1945, where he resumed his teaching and the work on his doctoral degree. He is the co-author of *Toward Better English*, a workbook in college English, which was published in 1941.